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ABSTRACT

This paper, organized into three sections, describes the development, implementation, and supervisory aspects of a cooperative learning program in a typical fifth-grade classroom. Discussed from the teacher's point of view, section 1 addresses: (1) development of teams; (2) social skills development; (3) teammate interdependence, heterogeneous teams, team interdependence, accountability, and activity appropriateness--five essential concepts which must be built into a successful cooperative learning lesson; and (4) classroom applications. Section 2 details the training, orientation, and experiences of a student teacher with respect to cooperative learning methods in three fifth-grade classrooms. This section describes a research project designed to evaluate the five essential components of cooperative learning lessons through classroom observation, conferences with students and teachers, and surveys administered to both teachers and students. Results suggest that cooperative learning is an effective technique for successful teaching and learning. Appendices contain a student teacher questionnaire, the evaluation instrument, and cooperative learning questionnaires for teachers and students. (LL)

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1.

PRACTICAL USES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING
IN A FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM

BY

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Presented on February 17, 1992 at the
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PRACTICAL USES OF COOPERATIVE
LEARNING IN A FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM

Cooperative learning has been advocated as a teaching strategy for the past twenty years. Johnson and Johnson (1975), Slavin (1987,1989), Sharan (cited in Gillespy,1991), and Kegan (Cited in Gillespy,1991) have spent years developing and presenting their research and writings in this area. Their interest in the topic is based from the fact that the business world has said workers show deficiencies in the skills that are typically implemented in a well-structured cooperative learning classroom situation. Unfortunately, many school districts are not providing adequate support to a teacher wanting to use innovative teaching methods in the classroom and thus, many teachers are still using traditional methods. This presentation is a case study of how two people who have worked together have learned to implement cooperative learning in a fifth grade classroom. The presentation will show a cycle of how cooperative learning is implemented, developed, and supervised in a typical classroom.

THE TEACHER'S SIDE OF THE STORY

I am a fifth grade teacher. My side of the story begins in October, 1990. While taking a class in advanced teaching methods at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, I had been assigned to write a paper on a topic of my choice. I chose to conduct research on the topic of cooperative learning. After an exhaustive search of the literature, I found I had become fascinated with this "new" teaching method called cooperative learning.

I decided to try this method in my fifth grade classroom. I read as much as I could about cooperative learning and tentatively tried to teach a few lessons. In March and April of 1991, I took a two day workshop presented by Dr. Judith Ivaries from Eastern Illinois University, which increased my knowledge of cooperative learning in the classroom.

I adapted and suited the method to my situation and students. In the next few moments, I will try to explain how cooperative learning works in my classroom.

Development of Teams

Teams can be formed heterogeneously in several ways. Teachers can group students, use random numbering, or any particular way of grouping, according to the choice of the teacher. Teachers can give students a choice about one person they would like to work with, while selecting the other members to assure that teams are grouped heterogeneously.

After teams of three to four students are formed, team names can be chosen through group discussion. Typically, have students find ways in which they are similar and/or different from their teammates to build team rapport. Once team names are selected, cooperative learning principles/concepts are explained. For example, teams earn points for various incentives. They may earn points for completed group or individual work. At the end of the assigned time they work in that particular team, the points are added to earn incentives, such as extra computer, reading, or writing time.

Social Skills Development

Social skill objectives are brainstormed by the class. A different objective is observed by the teacher and students each week. The teacher can add social objectives as needed. These are modeled and the teacher can ask for specific examples of how those social skills can be observed and heard if a group is using the skills. The teacher monitors each group or an observer role is used to look for those skills to be used by the group.

Important Concepts

I try to assure that the five components of a cooperative learning lesson are built into my lesson. These elements are teammate interdependence, heterogeneous teams, team interdependence, accountability, and activity appropriateness. When I have not had these elements built into a lesson, it is usually not successful.

Classroom Applications

Traditional teachers can also use cooperative learning in the classroom. Students may be grouped in pairs to complete spelling blanks or do math problems. Students may be grouped in other configurations to review for a chapter test in science. Groups may do work to achieve guided practice before proceeding to independent practice of a skill. Though these sessions may be drill, they, too, will effectively teach the skills related to social cooperation. Teachers may use cooperative learning teams to complete research projects, edit writing for team members, or when working on hands-on science activities.

The cooperative learning method of teaching is one that teachers can use after practice and much planning. If a teacher starts out trying to incorporate one lesson at a time into classroom practice, it is much easier to increase the number of these lessons into classroom curriculum. This method takes more time to execute because the social skills objectives have to be discussed before and after the lesson. I have used cooperative learning in my classroom and feel that it is successful. I have observed increased self esteem, more enthusiasm for learning, and greater achievement of students. I have enjoyed teaching more and have felt a renewed interest in the learning that goes on in my classroom as a result of implementing cooperative learning.

Another chapter to my story began in my classroom in August of 1991. I had a student teacher in my classroom from Southern Illinois University. I wanted her to be able to use cooperative learning in the classroom, so I started a program of introducing her to cooperative learning. I began by giving her a survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) that I devised to discover her attitudes, beliefs, and previous knowledge of cooperative learning. I modeled cooperative lessons in the classroom. I asked her to keep a written journal about her learning experiences in this method. We viewed the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development tapes on cooperative learning to gain more insights into this area. The student teacher read journal articles that I provided to learn more about cooperative learning. She used cooperative learning several times during each week in different subject areas. She assigned each learning group roles which were switched weekly. I was very pleased to see that she used cooperative learning as one of the teaching methods during her student teaching experience.

I gave her the same questionnaire about cooperative learning at the end of her experience in December. I observed that her answers were more detailed and knowledgeable in the expository questions and seemed more confident in the tone of these answers. The answers on the rating questions had not changed from the pre- to post-assessment.

I feel very confident that my student teacher could use the skills she gained using cooperative learning in a classroom that she might teach in the future. I feel that she is as knowledgeable as any present classroom teacher is and as skilled as a teacher beginning to use this teaching method. I did feel that she needs to work more on developing social skills as part of the cooperative learning situation. That would have been the next step in working with her, to develop skill in teaching and modeling social skills' development and practice. I would also have liked to videotaped her lessons to be able to do more in-depth evaluation of her lessons in cooperative learning.

As of January 1, 1992 our school district has gone to site-based staff development procedure. Funds have been set aside to further the knowledge and interest of teachers in our school in cooperative learning. As I serve on the committee for cooperative learning in our school and we find out that our teachers want to see actual cooperative learning lessons in a classroom and peer coaching in this area, I am excited and challenged to see my peers become interested in this profitable method of teaching.

Carl Leslie came to my classroom and used an instrument he had developed to provide a supervisory experience for two other teachers and myself using cooperative learning in my school. I needed this observation to determine if my lessons contained the five elements of a cooperative learning lesson.

THE RESEARCHER'S SIDE OF THE STORY

I became interested in cooperative learning as the result of a classroom project. I found it to be much of what the researchers have said it to be over the past months, and its effect is to be commended. Since my class, I have been afforded the opportunity to conduct some extensive research in cooperative learning and I've drawn many of the same positive conclusions as earlier researchers, especially that cooperative learning is an effective strategy for getting people to learn, and that it develops a number of other skills that are necessary in our multidimensional world.

In cooperation with my colleague, Rebecca Belt, I was able to conduct research in her own and two additional fifth grade classrooms. Each classroom was using the strategy of cooperative learning. I spent several days in these classes observing the teaching and learning techniques. I then developed an instrument which I refer to as the Evaluation Tool (see Appendix B) which proved effective in the evaluation of the three teachers included in this study. The Tool evaluates the five essential components of a cooperative learning lesson-- 1) heterogeneous teams; 2) teammate interdependence; 3) interdependence of teams; 4) accountability; and 5) activity appropriateness (Watson & Rangel, 1989).

After the evaluation, a post-conference was conducted with the teachers to discuss the evaluation results. Both students and teachers who participated in the study were surveyed, after my observations were completed, with a questionnaire prepared by the researcher. The questionnaires (see Appendices C and D) revealed that both the teachers and students felt cooperative learning is truly an effective technique for successful teaching and learning. They felt that it not only provided them with skills necessary to cope in the classroom, but coping skills for the outside world, as well. The students expressed a sense of ownership for the learning that they gained during the lessons, whereas the teacher acted as a resource person in the learning environment, and he/she still fulfilled a vital role in the learning process. The students were self motivated and enthusiastic to be part of a team and to fulfill their roles on the team in order to achieve a common goal for the team's success. The research indicated that both teachers and students were happier with the strategy of cooperative learning than the traditional methods of drill and practice or lecture; the students were able to assume an increasing amount of the responsibility gained or not gained.

CONCLUSION

We found, through experience, that cooperative learning is an effective teaching method. And, through the cooperative efforts of these presenters, it has been shown that cooperative learning is effective at all levels when people want to reach common goals. Those common goals result in increased learning, whether they be in the context of a college classroom for graduate students or the elementary classroom for fifth graders.

Appendix A

Student Teacher Questionnaire

1. What is your definition of cooperative learning?
2. Have you ever taught a cooperative learning lesson? If so, explain grade level, subject, and a brief summary of the lesson.
3. What makes a cooperative learning situation different from working in groups?
4. What reading have you done on cooperative learning?
5. Do you think there is a place for cooperative learning in the classroom? If so, how?
6. Have you ever experienced a cooperative learning situation as a student? If so, explain.
7. What are your general feelings about cooperative learning?

8. Rate the following statements.

- | | Agree | | | Disagree | |
|--|-------|---|---|----------|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. I feel cooperative learning is an effective teaching tool. | | | | | |
| 2. It is important to have social skills objectives in a cooperative learning lesson. | | | | | |
| 3. I enjoy using cooperative learning as a teaching method in the classroom. | | | | | |
| 4. I would use cooperative learning as the only teaching method in my classroom. | | | | | |
| 5. Cooperative learning is the same as group work. | | | | | |
| 6. Students benefit and learn more in a cooperative learning situation. | | | | | |
| 7. Cooperative learning is one of the methods I will use in a classroom I may teach in the future. | | | | | |

Appendix B

Evaluation ToolHeterogeneous Teams

1. Teams should be composed of four to six members. How many were in each team?
2. Teams should represent a true cross section of the classroom. How were the teams balanced as to race, gender, and academic achievement?
3. There should not be "high flyers." Were there "high flyer" teams?
4. There should not be "low flyers." Were there "low flyer" teams?
5. In the classroom, the seating arrangement should encourage team members to interact. Did the seating arrangement encourage team members to interact?
6. Teams should sit at common tables or with seats together. How did the teams sit?
7. Teams' identities or nicknames should be readily apparent. Were the teams' identities or nick names apparent?

Teammate Interdependence

1. When interdependence exists, students should be aware that they play a unique role on the team and the team cannot succeed without their efforts. Was it apparent that the team members understood they play a unique role on the team and the team could not succeed without their input?
2. Team members should be able to identify their position on the team. Were the team members able to identify their position on the team?
3. Teammate interdependence can also be observed in student behaviors, such as working closely together; discussing what they have to do; completing drills and practices to increase accuracy; helping one another with the answers to questions; using materials together; and assisting each other to learn. Were the team members assisting each other to learn?

Team Interdependence

1. The various teams in the classroom should not be locked in a struggle to overcome their classmates on other teams. Was there competition among the various groups?
2. Through cooperative learning, team members learn while helping the team attain the simple goal of academic success of its members, Was there evidence that the team members were working to attain academic success for all members? What is some of this evidence?
3. Was there evidence of negative actions against the other teams?
4. Rewards should be set up so the whole class is rewarded for combined achievements after an extended period of time. What type of rewards were set up for the whole class?
5. Students should be aware that their current teams are only temporary. Teams should be rearranged at a maximum of every six weeks to allow extensive interaction among classmates and to avoid unexpected unfair teams from dominating. What evidence supports the above statement?

Accountability

1. Educators continually worry that one team member is going to do all the work and the rest will ride on that person's coattails. How were all team members held accountable?
2. How were the teams rewarded for achieving a group goal?

Activity Appropriateness

1. Were the team members expected to complete tasks that should not be done cooperatively?
2. Did students get started on the task right away?
3. Did the students understand what they were supposed to do?
4. Did the students appear to have enough information to complete the activity?
5. Did the students appear to have the social maturity to deal with the complexity of the task they were assigned?

Appendix C

Cooperative Learning Teacher Questionnaire

1. How long have you been teaching (including time in other schools and systems)?
2. How long have you taught in this school system?
3. How long have you been interested in cooperative learning?
4. How long have you been implementing cooperative learning activities?
5. What special training have you had in cooperative learning?
6. Do you think cooperative learning is an effective learning technique?
7. If so, why do you think it is effective or ineffective?
8. What percent of the teachers at your school are involved with cooperative learning?
9. Do you collaborate your planning with other teachers?
If you do, how does that work?
10. How did you get started in cooperative learning?
11. How does your principal support your innovative ideas?
12. What were some of your difficulties when you first started using cooperative learning as a teaching technique?
13. What advice would you offer other teachers wanting to implement cooperative learning in their classroom?
14. How much of your time did you spend in meetings and other activities directly related to cooperative learning before implementing it?
15. How would you rate the impact of time spent in cooperative learning activities on student performance?
☐ Positive ☐ Neutral ☐ Negative
16. Have you noted any changes in student performance of students involved in cooperative learning?
☐ Yes, Positive ☐ Yes, Negative ☐ No
☐ Too early to tell

16.

17. How would you rate the performance of your class since you started using cooperative learning?
- ____ Better than before ____ Same as before
____ Not as good as before
18. Which subjects/classes do you use cooperative learning?
19. Do you think it is feasible to use cooperative learning in all subjects/classes? Why or why not?
20. Have you been able to get the materials you need? Why or why not?
21. Are there special materials needed when you use cooperative learning?
22. If so, what are the special materials?
23. What are steps of establishing a cooperative learning lesson?
24. What are some special things the students of cooperative learning must go through before the technique can be effective?
25. Would you like to add anything about cooperative learning?

Appendix D

Cooperative Learning Student Questionnaire

1. How long have you been a student of cooperative learning?
2. What subject/class(es) are you in when the technique cooperative learning is being used?
3. If you the choice, would you have chosen cooperative learning for this subject/class(es)?
4. What special training have you had in cooperative learning?
5. Do you think cooperative learning is an effective learning technique?
6. If so, why do you think it is effective?
7. Are there friends of yours involved with cooperative learning?
8. If so, do you all collaborate about your class experiences?
9. If you were teaching, would you use cooperative learning in your classroom?
10. Compared to traditional methods, in what ways have cooperative learning contributed to your learning of the material in your class?
☐ More ☐ About the same ☐ Not as much as the traditional method
11. What were some of your difficulties when you first got involved with cooperative learning as a learning technique?
12. What advice would you offer to other students considering getting involved in a class where cooperative learning is used?
13. How much time was spent preparing you for the cooperative learning technique before it was implemented?
14. How would you rate the impact of this time spent on cooperative learning related activities on your performance?
☐ Positive ☐ Neutral ☐ Negative
15. Have you noted any changes in your performance as a student involved in cooperative learning?
☐ Yes, Positive ☐ Yes, Negative ☐ No
☐ Too early to tell

18.

16. How would you rate the performance of your class since cooperative learning was implemented?
____ Better than before ____ Same as before
____ Not as good as before
17. Do you think it is feasible to use cooperative learning in all subjects/classes? Why or why not?
18. What are some special things the students of cooperative learning must go through before the technique can be effective?
19. Would you like to add anything about cooperative learning?

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